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Contemporary Challenges in Local Government: Evolving Roles and Responsibilities, Structures, and Processes

Editor's Note: The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) celebrates the 100th anniversary of its founding in 2014. This article is the first of several that will appear during the next year about the council-manager plan to commemorate ICMA's 100th anniversary.

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Three contemporary leadership challenges face local governments today. The first encourages department heads to more actively work the intersection between political and administrative arenas. The second promotes collaborative work, synchronizing city and county boundaries with problems that have no jurisdictional homes. The third argues that citizen engagement is no longer optional—it is imperative—and that connecting engagement initiatives to traditional political values and governing processes is an important mark of successful community building. These three leadership challenges stem from a widening gap between the arenas of politics and administration—that is, between what is politically acceptable in public policy making and what is administratively sustainable. The gap is fueled by conflicting trends experienced locally and common internationally. Failure to bridge this gap between political acceptability and administrative sustainability results in decreasing legitimacy for governing institutions and increasing challenges.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate conversations around contemporary leadership challenges in local government. The challenges that we identify represent adaptations in local government roles and responsibilities, structures, and processes in response to a changing local government environment. Most prominent in that environment is the increasingly difficult task of connecting what is “politically acceptable” and “administratively sustainable”—politics and administration. The difficulty is

accentuated as the widespread trends of administrative modernization and the politics of identity are experienced locally.

We begin by describing the forces of modernization and the politics of identity and how their juxtaposition widens the gap between what is politically acceptable and administratively sustainable. Then, we briefly discuss bridging the gap as the fundamental prerequisite for effective governance. That is followed by identification and discussion of how local governments are attempting to bridge the gap and the challenges encountered. We conclude with practical and conceptual guidance for the local government professional administrator.

Administrative Modernization and the Politics of Identity

In the mid-2000s, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) launched a project to identify practices that professional local government administrators bring to their communities. The findings reinforced the chief administrative officer's role working in and bridging the gap between the arenas of politics and administration (Keene et al. 2007). Among the six practices identified, one in particular conveys an expectation that city and county managers should become more involved with community partners, including elected officials, to facilitate community and enable democracy: *Professionals help build community and support democratic and community values.*

Professional managers help build community by facilitating partnerships among sectors, groups and individuals. They work with informal

groups of people as well as established groups, organizations, and other governing institutions. Local government professionals—through their values, training, and experience—support

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democratic values and work effectively toward inclusion, accountability, and transparency. Developing effective partnerships with elected officials and generating community engagement are as important as the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in helping to build a sense of community (Keene et al. 2007, 38).

Today, the professional manager's role in policy making and community building is widely accepted, yet role expectations once again have garnered attention. Contemporary city and county managers find their facilitating or bridging role in community building complicated by two contemporary forces that we refer to as "administrative modernization" and the "politics of identity" (Nalbandian 2005). These forces extend well beyond individual communities, informing discussions of international relations. James Rosenau suggests their breadth and significance: "the best way to grasp world affairs today requires viewing them as an endless series of distant proximities in which the forces pressing for greater globalization and those inducing greater localization interactively play themselves out" (2003, 4). We contend that understanding these trends is critical to comprehending the serious challenge posed by bridging the gap between political acceptability and administrative sustainability in local communities. Failure to make the connection means that public concerns are unattended or addressed ineffectively, and lack of trust and legitimacy in government results (Pew Research Center 2012).

Administrative Modernization

According to Rosenau, modernization includes these elements:

- A communications revolution that rapidly transmits ideas, information, images, and money across continents
- A transportation revolution that hastens the boundary-spanning flow of people and goods
- An organizational revolution that has shifted the flow of authority, influence, and power, beyond traditional boundaries
- An economic revolution that has redirected the flow of goods, services, capital, and ownership (2003, 51).

The impact of these revolutions is to create more administrative homogeneity throughout the world than previous generations saw. The literature on modernization and globalization suggests two characteristics that affect the design and practice of contemporary public administration. First, hard data drive out soft data when there is confidence in an understanding of cause and effect in production processes (Thompson 1967). One would not think today of assessing property without the benefit of electronic databases and statistical formulas, and actuarial tables are essential to pension calculations, for example. Second, the efficiency goal of administrative practice is to increase quality and reduce variation in outputs (Deming 1986) at the cheapest cost. Standardization and centralization—based on confidence in cause-and-effect relationships in production processes grounded in empirical evidence—are designed to produce high-quality efficiency.

Politics of Identity

Simultaneously, increasing quality and reducing variation through standardization

and evidence-based best practices challenges what is spontaneous, unique, and experiential because these are sources of variation. The second trend, the politics of identity, is the desire to hold on to variation and to place value on one's experiences and to differentiate oneself, one's group, or one's community from others. Today's emphasis on branding in local governments internationally reflects this desire to differentiate one jurisdiction from another to counter the modernizing pressures toward standardization; the desire to tell a community's story offers soft evidence that uniqueness—variation—is valued. Howard Gardner insightfully writes about storytelling and leadership by employing examples of compelling narratives that speak to the mind but reach for the heart (Gardner and Laskin 1995). According to Gardner, the most powerful stories are those that touch one's identity—who we were, who we are, and what we can become. Here are a couple of examples of the ways in which identity and associated emotions and beliefs play out in local policy issues:

- A set of three San Francisco suburban cities came to an agreement on shared fire and emergency response services based on discussions about efficiency and effectiveness. The stumbling block was whether the smaller jurisdictions would have to give up their logos on the equipment.¹ This seems trivial, until one realizes that the logo symbolizes independence and a sense of community identity.
- The city of Owasso, Oklahoma, passed a resolution in 2002, declaring itself a "City of Character." The city's Character Initiative is overseen by Owasso's human resources department and a Character Council, composed of members from each sector in the community. The city focuses on a new character trait each month, and the Character Council helps promote it to the public. Banners throughout the community are changed to reflect the new monthly character trait, information is disseminated through utility bills, and a separate Web site promoting Owasso's Character Initiative has been developed (<http://www.owassocharacter.org>). Michele Dempster, the city's human resources director and character coordinator, believes that the majority of community members support this initiative and that bringing "character" into a community-wide discussion has reflected very positively on Owasso's identity.²

In the quest for identity, Gardner (1991) issues caution in introducing us to the concept of the "unschooled mind." The unschooled mind is driven by intuition and emotion that emanates from interests that touch one's self-regard. It is comparable to the allure of the "confirming mind," a human predisposition that seeks confirmation of one's views rather than challenges (Bialik 2012; Festinger 1957; Finkelstein, Whitehead, and Campbell 2008).

Problems that formerly might have been seen in relatively simple terms are now subject to complex statistical analyses growing out of increasingly large databases, often producing alternatives qualified by probabilities.

In contrast, in the arena of administrative modernization, enhanced analytical capacity means more data, which reveals more complexity. Problems that formerly might have been seen in relatively simple terms are now subject to complex statistical analyses growing out of increasingly large databases, often producing alternatives qualified by probabilities. But the increasing sophistication of policy development and analysis is undermined by the

simplistic themes and symbols contained in today's political stories and campaigns, often anchored in an idyllic sense of a past dominated by images of "the way we never were" (Coontz 2000). The city and county manager and administrative staff work in the realm of data and analysis with sober concerns for what is administratively sustainable, while elected officials are working to develop what is politically acceptable within the often emotional context of community identity. The juxtaposition of the trends of modernization and identity accentuates and accelerates the gap.³ And we should remind ourselves of the proposition that connecting the two is a prerequisite for effective governance (Appleby 1949, 47).

Leadership Challenges and Methodology

We have identified three leadership challenges associated with bridging the gap between what is administratively sustainable and what is politically acceptable.⁴ The three focus on roles and responsibilities, structures, and processes of local government, suggesting their scope and importance. We will identify them and then describe how they were selected.

- **Leadership Challenge 1:** Create and reinforce roles and responsibilities below the position of city/county manager or chief administrative officer that bridge the gap while avoiding political alignment or administrative compromise.
- **Leadership Challenge 2:** Synchronize government jurisdictions and other structures of authority with problems to be solved, valuing networks, collaborative relationships, and skills.
- **Leadership Challenge 3:** Integrate citizen and other forms of engagement (planned and spontaneous, including social media) with traditional local government structures and processes.

We employed a variety of qualitative approaches to identify the challenges. These included in-depth discussions with the leadership team in the city of Olathe, Kansas; electronic consultation with a professional network of local government administrators and academicians created when the ICMA challenged its members to articulate the value that professional management contributes to local jurisdictions (Keene et al. 2007); and the personal and professional experiences of the team of authors, which incorporates a wide range of academic and professional local government perspectives.

We drew on the experiences of the Olathe, Kansas, leadership team to develop our leadership agenda. Engagement with the city of Olathe was stimulated by the Alliance for Innovation's request to identify contemporary challenges facing an innovative Midwestern city, and the Alliance suggested that we focus on Olathe. At the Alliance for Innovation's Big Ideas Conference in Fort Collins, Colorado, in the fall of 2011, we shared our findings alongside those from San Jose, California, and local governments in North Carolina.

The leadership team in Olathe consisted of the city manager, assistant city manager, eight department heads, and 11 of their immediate staff, including division managers. There were 21 people on the team in this city of approximately 125,000, located in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Olathe is a suburban community with a

history of growth. It is accustomed to professional government, has a stable council, and is regarded nationally among local government professionals and academicians as innovative. In the last decade, the city has seen significant growth in its immigrant population and, like other local jurisdictions, has found itself in a retrenchment mode for a couple of years.

We met with the leadership team on three occasions; the leadership challenges were identified as a result of these meetings. At the first meeting, we suggested to team members that bridging the gap between political acceptability and administrative sustainability is the fundamental prerequisite for effective governance. We asked

team members to think about challenges that they face bridging this gap, and we agreed that the challenges could be grouped into three broad categories: roles and responsibilities, structures, and processes of governance. On the second and third occasions, a discussion was held with the leadership team further refining the challenge areas. Following these meetings and a literature review, the final versions of three challenges were established.

We then asked leadership team members to provide written examples of the challenges, which they provided to the authors by e-mail.

To test the validity of these three challenges among local government professionals more generally, we subjected them to national scrutiny. We invited a select group of 75 city and county managers, drawn from an ICMA professionalism task force (Keene et al. 2007), to comment on each of the leadership challenges. This group of city and county managers was sent the following phrasing for the challenge areas, with each sent in a separate e-mail:

Leadership Challenge 1: How to create and reinforce bridge-building roles and problem-oriented approaches without becoming politically aligned or administratively compromised; Leadership Challenge 2: How to synchronize government jurisdiction and other structures of authority with problems to be solved—imperative for collaborative relationships and skills; Leadership Challenge 3: How to incorporate citizen engagement (planned and spontaneous, including social media) with traditional local government structures and processes.

We received 13 responses. The first leadership challenge, focusing on roles and responsibilities, drew the most interest, with the responses suggesting that it is an emerging and controversial practice in local government. A discussion of each leadership challenge follows.

Leadership Challenge 1: Roles and Responsibilities

Create and reinforce roles and responsibilities below the position of city/county manager or chief administrative officer that bridge the gap while avoiding political alignment or administrative compromise.

City and county managers and some mayors are familiar with "working the gap" between administrative sustainability and political acceptability (Nalbandian 2001; Nalbandian and Nalbandian 2002, 2003; Svava 2009), and much has been written about the importance of council-staff effectiveness since initiation of the

council-manager form in the early twentieth century (Nalbandian and Portillo 2006). Today, most managers recognize this as part of their role. For example, in an e-mail correspondence (March 2, 2012), Jim Ley, former county manager of Sarasota County, Florida, asked philosophically, “Is it not our responsibility [city and county managers] to be the stewards of the system we manage, to teach where teaching is absent, to demand accountability to our fundamental values of governance ... Are we courageous enough to manage the narrative of the public good that is based in assuming such a role?” More directly, Ken Hampian, former city manager of San Luis Obispo, California, suggested that bridging the gap is a core requirement for many positions and that city (and county) managers must be the role models for department heads in this regard. Further, he suggested that some city (and county) managers “just don’t get the more textured nature of the job and public and organizational leadership skills/attitudes needed today. They tend to work within a paradigm that is black and white (where staff, of course, is wearing the white hat and is protector of all that is good, just and honorable)” (e-mail correspondence, February 19, 2012).

As the gap increases—to a significant degree, attributable locally to the tensions between administrative modernization and the politics of identity—the city and county manager’s role as a “bridge builder” is accentuated, and he or she is likely to spend more time with the governing body and community members than in the past. This leaves less time for managers to translate political thinking into administrative problems to be solved for the benefit of staff. One important consequence is that department heads—who formerly earned respect for running their departments efficiently and effectively and producing policy-related information and recommendations—are now expected to move into the gap and to understand, respect, and contribute to the concept of “political acceptability.” According to O’Neill (2012), once in the gap, they are expected to broaden their mental maps to focus on common public problems such as economic development, safety and security, health care, education, and the environment, requiring an interdisciplinary, interdepartmental approach that may extend beyond the organization itself.

This effect was confirmed in our discussions with the Olathe leadership team and in the responses from the national respondents. Those department heads who today add value are not the ones who simply accept “politics” or who in the past have worked the gap to their own department’s advantage. Instead, they understand the values trade-offs that are taking place, and they increasingly find themselves involved in the world of politics—which the manager can no longer shield them from—becoming sensitized to political dynamics, it is hoped, without being captured by them (Nalbandian 2001). Katy Simon, county manager of Washoe County, Nevada, made this point succinctly: “I believe considerable training and mentoring is needed to help department leaders successfully navigate the political landscape. Another angle on this issue is the perilous tendency of some department heads to coalesce with a single elected leader or a faction that expresses particular interest in their department ... this

can result in numerous meetings without the manager, information exchanges that do not include the manager or assistant manager, and the risk of engendering ill will with the other electeds” (e-mail correspondence, February 17, 2012).

Debra Figone, city manager of San Jose, California, added, “Department heads are agents of the city manager, not free agents; working in the gap to meet my expectations is imbedded in this principle” (e-mail correspondence, February 20, 2012). However, as Michael Wilkes, city manager of Olathe, Kansas, pointed out, because of the complex environment that administrative staff find themselves in (described in Leadership Challenge 2), the city or county manager must trust that department heads will act in concert with team goals and culture. This puts the manager in a vulnerable position, risking that department heads will use their discretion in working the gap to increase their own power base and credibility, possibly at the manager’s expense (e-mail correspondence, March 23, 2012). Simon alluded to this earlier.

While political capture or alliance requires caution as department heads move into the gap, the department head faces another challenge: appearing to his or her staff as abandoning administrative and professional integrity, as well as standing up for his or her department employees. Figone reinforced this point when she observed that in San Jose, where there is acute fiscal stress, attention has shifted to pension obligations. She noted that the chiefs of the public safety departments are put in a particularly difficult position, as they must weigh their obligations as agents of the city manager with obligations to their staff. Likewise, Wilkes indicated that although ideological politics are filtering down to the local level with more evidence of uncompromising positions, it is not unusual for the city or county

manager to be challenged by an administrative cadre that (1) has become more specialized and discipline oriented and (2) at times is not ready to accept that a “reset” in local government is occurring (interview, September 7, 2011). In a subsequent correspondence, Wilkes continued to discuss this challenge: “The manager may intuitively know that a staff initiative is politically unacceptable at the same time that staff feels it is not only administratively sustainable, but an administrative imperative. These moments challenge the manager’s ability to lead the organization, raising questions in staff’s eyes regarding the manager’s commitment to the organization and professionalism” (March 23, 2012).

Leadership Challenge 2: Structures and Values

Synchronize government jurisdictions and other structures of authority with problems to be solved, valuing networks, collaborative relationships and skills.

A widening gap signifies the inability, reluctance, or lack of authority of government institutions to effectively deal with public problems (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; U.S. House of Representatives 2011). At the local level, the scope of the problems faced often extends beyond the jurisdiction’s authority (Frederickson 2007;

Rosenau 2003). Classic cases involve policy issues such as economic development, transportation, the environment, and land use in metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, the desire for local identity, one of our dominant trends, and community branding may actually work against the integrated responses needed to solve problems that cross jurisdictions (Tschirhart, Christensen, and Perry 2005).

A classic response to challenges in which formal jurisdictional authority and problem dimensions are incongruent is the creation of regional public authorities (Dodge 2010). In these cases, the authority is legitimized in the law. Yet even here, the issue may be much more complex and go well beyond organizations that have legal authority. For example, dealing with issues of homelessness locally may involve not only government action that is grounded in the law but also the work of churches, nonprofits, and foundations—each of which has its own claim to legitimacy. Rosenau (2003) employs the concept of “structure of authority” to explain that any party may claim legitimacy, with some being able to elicit more compliant responses and engagement than others. He observes that beyond the law, authority may reside in expertise, tradition, and moral claims. The structure of authority concept is helpful in crafting the second challenge. Because no single entity, regardless of its source of legitimacy, can solve perplexing problems that extend beyond its boundary of legitimacy, the leadership challenge is how to assemble and coordinate various structures of authority into effective networks of responsibility and sources of service delivery (Feldman 2010; Frederickson 2007).

Meanwhile, the space between what is politically acceptable and administratively sustainable becomes a source of significant power. That is, as the gap widens, both established and emergent third parties can seize an opportunity to exercise influence previously reserved for those operating only within formal governing structures and processes. Data from the Urban Institute’s National Center for Charitable Statistics show that from 1999 to 2009, the number of nonprofit organizations grew from 1,202,573 to 1,581,111, a 31.5 percent increase (Urban Institute n.d.). The proliferation of third parties such as foundations, nonprofits, private sector conveyors of services, and ad hoc advocacy groups has become commonplace, as have terms such as “governance,” “the hollow state,” “the extended state,” “shared services,” and “cross-sector partnerships” (Dubnick and Frederickson 2011; Kettl 2000; Mathur and Skelcher 2007; Milward and Provan 2000; Soni 2011).

Under these circumstances, bridging the gap requires an ability to manage networks of groups and actors. Thus, a corollary challenge within the second leadership challenge is an understanding that network management is different from managing within hierarchy (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Bozeman 2007; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012; Getha-Taylor 2008; Goerdel 2006; Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012; Silvia and McGuire 2010; Thomson and Perry 2006). Collaboration, with its attendant issues, is key to network management: What is the network’s source of authority? Who should be involved? How will responsibility be assigned? How should participants deal with delegates who come to the table with different levels of discretion, as well as sector-based incentives that drive each structure of authority? The answers to these questions vary with the type of collaboration. For example, looking beyond the creation of a legal public authority, an alternative response may

resemble the creation of a shared services agreement like the one that the “Business Support Services” unit in Charlotte has consummated with surrounding county, municipal, state, and even federal agencies.

However, it is not uncommon for these leadership attempts to be rejected. For example, if networks include faith-based institutions, questions of freedom of religion and church and state may be raised. These types of entities and agreements connect to Figone’s advice that we need to be clear about which structure is truly accountable even in networked worlds. In order to maintain public accountability in complex networks, Figone believes that stronger and more sophisticated leadership from elected and professional staff is needed (e-mail correspondence, February 20, 2012).

Also embedded in the second challenge is a crucial consideration focusing on the way nongovernmental structures of authority deal with public values such as representation, social equity, and individual rights, as well as efficiency (Andrews and Entwistle 2010; Warner 2011). An example can be seen in the Kresge Foundation’s urban renewal initiative in Detroit. The Kresge Foundation has expended considerable sums of money to assist in renewal and redevelopment of Detroit. However, the fundamental question raised by some in Detroit is “who is running our city?” (Dolan 2011), with the implied question, “whose values will prevail?”

Summarizing the second challenge, the increasing emphasis on third-party governance raises issues of accountability to public values, government institutions, and processes and increases the challenge of coordinating and managing multiple independent initiatives in the absence of formal community-wide coordinating mechanisms. This brings us to the third leadership challenge.

Leadership Challenge 3: Processes

The first challenge focused on roles and responsibilities, and the second challenge primarily on structure and values. The third addresses the issue of processes and the imperative of engaging parties with differing interests, authority, and motives.

Integrate citizen and other forms of engagement (planned and spontaneous, including social media) with traditional local government structures and processes.

Collaborative engagement, the focus of the third leadership challenge, is a mechanism that can be employed to coordinate disparate structures of authority, turning them into working networks. While this leadership challenge complements the second challenge, it should not be confused with it; the second challenge focuses on the importance of structure when working within a networked environment, while the third challenge’s focus is collaborative engagement as a process.

Whether within a single jurisdiction or a network of independent structures of authority, one of the challenges associated with engagement is finding ways to successfully merge multiple sources of information and communication with traditional governing structures and processes (Bryer 2009; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Fagotto and Fung 2009; Leighninger 2006). Because citizens are also stakeholders, we believe that if engagement is not integrated with

the processes of government institutions, the expressions of desired outcomes will not be weighed against a full array of public values. For example, governing bodies must engage the conflicts among values such as representation, efficiency, social equity, and individual rights (Nalbandian 2006)—all fundamental democratic values. Advocates, whether expressing their views in person or electronically, do not have the same obligations. The challenge is how to connect the issue-specific and passionate views of advocates, or the players in a network context in which there are different missions, motivations, and identities, with the totality of democratic value considerations.

Mary Furtado, assistant manager in Catawba County, North Carolina, described this challenge: “The communication dilemma manifests itself in both extremes: comments/feedback that is so niche-specific that it belies a narrow view of government versus feedback that is so general in expression containing broad citizen sentiments and ungrounded in specifics as to not be useful for much at all. Then there is the problem that the confluence of input coming at government leaders may dilute its impact due to sheer volume. If the stream of citizen input is constant, it can become overwhelming and therefore easier to tune out some or all of it” (e-mail correspondence, March 6, 2012).

Social media highlights this challenge. Its popularity provides new opportunities for local governments to engage its citizens, but it also poses significant challenges. At an early juncture, we asked the Olathe leadership team about difficulties in producing valid and relevant information, given the prevalence of social media and other accessible information sources. The fact that the city’s leadership team includes a communication and engagement manager indicates the central importance that Olathe places on navigating this challenge, especially as it links to the organization’s emphasis on performance management. Tim Danneberg, the communication and engagement manager, pointed to the ease with which people can compile a breadth and depth of information on a topic today via the Internet; the validity and quality of the information, however, is another matter, and one that the city must address:

In an era that prides itself on data-driven decisions, much of the information available via the Internet is instead opinion, perception, rhetoric and supposition rather than hard, factual data. ... Everyone has an opinion and the opinions have been amplified in their velocity, intensity and frequency by the Internet. Politicians and other decision makers can now continuously and instantaneously consume mass quantities of information that strengthen and often morph an array of opinions.

Olathe’s performance measurement initiatives serve well in meeting this challenge. To combat the overload of available information, factual data must be continually collected, analyzed and reported. ... Data must be provided not only to those that make the decisions but also to those who may try to influence decision makers. The provision of quality,

The challenge is how to connect the issue-specific and passionate views of advocates, or the players in a network context in which there are different missions, motivations, and identities, with the totality of democratic value considerations.

relevant data may diminish the desire to search for answers on an Internet overloaded with information and opinions. (e-mail correspondence, September 11, 2011)

Put into the context of bridging the gap, the issue with citizen engagement, whether electronic or in person, is how the communication transaction affects either political acceptability or administrative sustainability. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, is the question of whether the engagement

serves as a bridge between the two.

Conclusions

We have argued that a fundamental and widening gap exists between what is politically acceptable and what is administratively sustainable and that connecting the two is a prerequisite for effective governance. The gap is accentuated by two global trends: administrative modernization, which has a homogenizing influence on individuals, administrative processes, and standards and on communities themselves, and the opposing trend, the search to create, maintain, and preserve a sense of political identity and community. These trends operate independently and often simultaneously and can conflict. We identified three leadership challenges that must be met by local government managers if they are to bridge this gap and lead effectively in this environment.

Several conclusions emerge. First, we can easily fit the challenges into fundamental elements of local government—roles and responsibilities, structures, and processes—suggesting important and lasting change. And we suggest that effective managers, elected officials, and department heads of the future will embrace the challenges and understand the impact that bridging the gap has on trust and legitimacy. But in order to be effective, understanding must be translated into behavior that is organizationally valued—reflected in strategic thinking about human resource management and then in job descriptions, performance appraisals, and incentive systems.

Second, we have incorporated network management into the leadership challenges. Networks imply boundaries, and we suspect that the concept of “boundary management” may add an element to this challenge. The idea of matching problems to be solved with structures of authority implies that for some problems, boundaries can be strong and fixed, while for others, boundaries must be permeable. “Managing boundaries” provides a conceptual lens through which we can view decision making and role expectations. An internal organizational analogy may be useful here. In some cases, a department head may draw boundaries rigidly and contrast the department’s interests and responsibilities with those of other departments. But on other occasions, the same department may have to drop its defining boundary and adopt a larger or smaller one to address a relevant problem. The implication here is that managers must exercise judgment about the permeability of the boundaries that define responsibilities and competence.

Third, while the city and county manager’s role has evolved gradually into one broadly conceptualized as facilitating community and

enabling democracy, department head roles and responsibilities are changing sharply: from running the department efficiently and providing policy choices and recommendations to becoming an ally and team member in the manager's cadre as he or she works the gap. The principal-agent concept that city manager Debra Figone used to describe the relationship between the city or county manager and department heads is evolving. Many department heads now work in an environment in which structures of authority and geographic jurisdiction are disarticulated. And they are exercising more independent discretion in their search for effectiveness. While we have described an expectation that department heads move vertically into the gap, they also work horizontally, both interdepartmentally and between jurisdictions and sectors. One suspects that the principal-agent relationship in this environment is found not in the military metaphor of a command structure but instead in the metaphor of a symphony leader (Pink 2005).

Finally, within each challenge is evidence of a common paradox. While each challenge expands the boundaries and the actors and entities involved in governance, new collective initiatives that operate without an influential role for government institutions may shortchange consideration of a comprehensive set of democratic values. The first challenge that we identified creates expectations that department heads will regard efficiency as just one in a broader range of political values to be considered in public policy making. In this regard, a key responsibility of the city and county manager is modeling the engagement of conflicting values in a way that preserves administrative integrity yet acknowledges and builds on what is politically acceptable. This issue of political values is noteworthy in the second challenge because we do cannot expect mission-based nonprofits or profit-driven private sector actors to embrace a full range of democratic values. Regarding the third challenge, while we commonly associate citizen engagement with democratic values, the association should be isolated to the value of representation. There is no guarantee that engagement will embrace the values of efficiency, equity, and/or the individual rights of others. It is passion reflecting one value or a combination of values that energizes the engagement process.

The comprehensive inclusion of democratic values such as representation, efficiency, social equity, and individual rights may be absent as we explore the three challenges and administrative responses. These values are fundamental to the democratic social contract, and they are embedded within the structures and processes of the same democratic government institutions that are losing credibility as the gap widens. As we move toward a governance model of dealing with issues of collective concern, it remains to be seen whether non-government actors or partnerships in which government does not play a prominent role can enact a comprehensive set of values and accept responsibility for enabling democracy.

The insights on contemporary leadership challenges facing local governments that emerged from this research provide a foundation for public administration scholars and practitioners to further explore the future manager's roles and responsibilities, as well as

structures and processes of governance. As the base of research on these contemporary leadership challenges grows, we anticipate that further guidance can be provided to local government professionals who face these challenges in their daily work.

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Notes

1. Conversation with Pat Martel, city manager, Daley City, California, April 20, 2011, Lawrence, Kansas.
2. Phone conversation with Michele Dempster, human resources director and character coordinator, Owasso, Oklahoma, October 25, 2012.
3. For further reading on administrative modernization and politics of identity, see Friedman (1999).
4. We present the three basic challenges here. Many challenges that fall within each of the three categories are available in the precursor to this paper available at http://transformgov.org/en/learning/Big_Ideas#6. As an example, under the roles and responsibilities challenge, a more specific question is, "How do emerging roles and responsibilities for bridging the gap affect confidence that elected officials and administrative staff have in the city manager and department heads? Specifically, as department heads begin to move into the gap and gain more understanding of political acceptability will their role undermine confidence of those who work for them? Will credibility be questioned by elected officials, and what implications could this have on the level of confidence placed in the organization's leaders?"

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